DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 540 CE 051 117

AUTHOR Spangenberg, Gail
TITLE The Broadcast Media & Literacy.
INSTITUTION Business Council for Effective Literacy, New York, NY.
PUB DATE Jul 86
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT BCEL Newsletter for the Business Community; v1 n8 p1,4-5 Jul 1986

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; *Broadcast Television; *Cooperative Programs; Educational Cooperation; *Illiteracy; *Literacy Education; Programing (Broadcast); *Public Television
IDENTIFIERS *Project Literacy U S

ABSTRACT

Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS) combines national network television and radio broadcasts with community action, alerting the public to the urgency of the adult illiteracy problem and helping to mobilize efforts to deal with it in towns and cities across the United States. All 525 affiliate and member stations of the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) take part by airing programs, referring member stations take part by airing programs, referring individuals to local programs of instruction, and otherwise giving assistance to individuals and groups in their communities. The PLUS initiative is conducted in two phases. The first, in process since January 1986, is focused on building an outreach infrastructure via the local ABC and PBS stations. The second, on-the-air coverage, operated throughout the September 1986-June 1987 broadcast season. The PLUS campaign overlaps, and works in cooperation with, the national multimedia campaign begun in January 1985 by the Coalition for Literacy and the Advertising Council. In some states, special television projects are in progress that will serve to reinforce the PLUS and Advertising Council efforts. However, short-run success in raising public awareness could ultimately result in failure, unless public and private sector funding sources can respond quickly with substantial new monies to support and nurture the new activities that will be generated. (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED300540

BCEL BUSINESS COUNCIL FOR EFFECTIVE LITERACY

ADULT LITERACY: PROGRAMS · PLANNING · ISSUES

A Newsletter For The Business Community

VOL. 1, NO. 8 JULY 1986

THE BROADCAST MEDIA & LITERACY

by
Gail Spangenberg
Vice President, BCEL

After working and sleeping, watching television is the third most popular activity of American adults. Between the ages of 6 and 18, children and teenagers watch an average of 18,000 hours of television (while spending 15,000 hours at school).*

Because television has such a prominent place in the homes of most Americans, including the one in every five adults who can't read and write, its reach as an instrument of persuasion and awareness-building is unique. Thus, when Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS), a multi-million dollar media campaign to help combat adult illiteracy, is aired in September, it can be expected to have a powerful impact nationwide, touching virtually every community in the U.S.

This therefore seems an ideal time to take a closer look at how that initiative will work, at some related projects under development, and at some factors that will have a bearing on the degree of success that these activities can ultimately have in terms of truly expanding service to adults in need of help.

The PLUS Initiative

On a number of counts, the PLUS project is a historic first. It is an unprecedented collaboration between public broadcasting and a commercial network–the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC)–and the first time that any two major national broadcasters have joined forces in a common public service effort.

PLUS will combine national network television and radio broadcasts with community action, alerting the public to the urgency of the adult illiteracy problem and helping to mobilize efforts to deal with it in towns and cities across the U.S.

All 525 ABC and PBS affiliate and member stations will be taking part–airing programs, referring individuals to local programs of instruction, and otherwise giving assistance to individuals and groups in their communities. ABC estimates its dollar commitment to PLUS, aside from the contributions of its local stations, to be well in excess of $1 million. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting is underwriting the PBS effort with grants to WQED in Pittsburgh for research and development and production of a documentary. Additional CPB funding will support the stations' community outreach activities.

The PLUS initiative is being conducted in two phases. The first, in process since January, is focussed on building an outreach infrastructure via the local ABC and PBS stations. The aim is to coordinate resources at the local level well in advance of the national public awareness broadcasts–to ensure that those who want help and who wish to give it will know where to turn in their communities. (PLUS telecasts are expected to reach more than 50 million households.)

The second phase, on-the-air coverage, will operate throughout the September 1986-June 1987 broadcast season. The kick-off piece, a primetime ABC news documentary narrated by Peter Jennings on the plight of illiterate Americans, will be aired on September 3rd. This will be followed on September 17th by the PBS documentary which will give visibility to a variety of successful on-going local programs for teaching nonliterate adults the basic skills. In between and through to June, all elements of ABC News will cover the subject: ***This Week*** with David Brinkley (September 7th); ***World News Tonight*** with Peter Jennings (a special-assignment series scheduled for the week of September 8th); ***Nightline*** with Ted Koppel; ***20/20*** with Hugh Downs and Barbara Walters; ***Good Morning America*** with David Hartman and Joan Lunden; and an ***ABC Afterschool Special***.

ABC's Entertainment Division will try to infuse thematic treatment of illiteracy into daytime serials and dramatic programming. For continuity between programs, public service announcements will be carried, and a series of spots on ***American Television and You*** will explain why the two networks have made a commitment to literacy. ABC Radio will also carry PSA's and mini-documentaries to its affiliates across the country. And local stations of both ABC and PBS will supplement the national broadcasts with their own locally-produced programs.

Other events in tandem with PLUS will extend the media blitz. For example, the American Newspaper Publishers Association is mounting a major literacy awareness campaign through its 1,400 member newspapers on the same time schedule as PLUS. President Reagan has proclaimed the month of September Adult Literacy Awareness Month, with messages to be delivered to the American public on Labor Day by both the President and Secretary of Labor Brock. On September 7th, designated "Literacy Sunday," religious leaders will include the subject of literacy in their sermons throughout the country and encourage their congregations to get involved.

The outreach component of the campaign, spearheaded by PBS, is the largest such effort ever undertaken by public television. A point repeatedly underscored by the networks is that the television programs in themselves are merely the centerpiece of community action that aims to promote or activate literacy programs at the grassroots level. "We are not experts on the problem of adult literacy," notes ABC president James Duffy. "We are not educators...Our role is to create a framework for participation."

At local levels, PLUS is supporting the work of existing literacy task forces and, where

(cont'd. on p. 4)

*"Television Technologies in Combatting Illiteracy, Barbara Marchilonis and Herman Niebuhr, National Adult Literacy Project, 1985

BCEL
Business Council For Effective Literacy
1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020
212-512-2415/2412

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BROADCAST MEDIA

(cont'd. from p. 1)

none exist, convening new ones. These groups–comprised of literacy providers, adult learners, educational planners, religious and civic groups, government and business leaders, and the ABC and PBS stations, will assess the locally-available literacy programs and resources and attempt to help them pool and coordinate their services to achieve greater outreach.

As of June, 260 communities had already formed PLUS task forces. In addition, 80 national organizations as diverse as the American Council of Life Insurance, the General Federation of Womens Clubs, the National Urban League, and the National Governors Association, had agreed to lend support by publicizing the campaign among their members and urging participation.

"PLUS will bring together more organizations than ever before which will declare literacy a priority for attention," says Douglas Bodwell, CPB's director of education. "Not just the traditionally-involved organizations, but new places like the Junior League and the American Legion working together for the first time, asking 'How can we help?'"

Each ABC and PBS station has both a staff literacy contact person and a volunteer community convenor. A national teleconference, seminars, and workshops are already being held across the country to train these people. And videotapes, manuals, guidelines, and bulletins are being produced to assist them.

That such efforts can produce significant results is evident from similar, if less ambitious, undertakings. In November 1983, in association with other oganizations, WQED aired THE CHEMICAL PEOPLE, a two-part documentary on drug and alcohol abuse in young people. This national television event was matched by local events including town meetings in 12,000 communities and the development of a local action plan in each. Some 8,000 of the groups that were formed on that occasion are still in existence, working on their action agendas.

The Ad Council Campaign In Parallel

The PLUS campaign will overlap, and work in cooperation with, the national multi-media campaign begun in January 1985 by the Coalition for Literacy and the Advertising Council. This three- to four-year Ad Council campaign is beginning to yield a vigorous response (despite curtailments in the program due to lack of adequate funding). The campaign seeks to recruit volunteer tutors, appeal to corporate funders, and motivate potential students to come forward for help. The ads (which appear on radio and television and in newspapers and consumer and business magazines) carry local and national call-in numbers for persons who wish to respond. The national number (800-228-8813) takes an estimated 10 percent of all calls nationally. It is operated by CONTACT Literacy Center in Lincoln, Nebraska, a national information and referral agency with links to thousands of local literacy programs. Through May 1986, CONTACT responded to some 52,500 calls, 65 percent of those from potential volunteers and 25 percent from potential students. (The latter statistic is noteworthy in that the ads specifically geared to adult non-literates have not yet been produced; these persons have picked up on ads they have seen, usually on television, for volunteer tutors.)

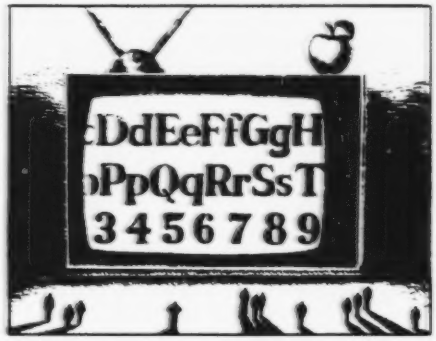
CONTACT will also serve as the toll-free national hotline response system for PLUS. President Gary Hill estimates that CONTACT must be prepared to handle a volume of 75,000 calls in September alone.

Other Reinforcements

In some states, special television projects are in the works that will serve to reinforce the PLUS and Ad Council efforts. For example, South Carolina Educational Television (SCETV) is mounting a 12-month statewide campaign urging its citizens to "Get on the Reading Railroad." The slogan, produced as an animated graphic, will appear on PSA's, bumper stickers, billboards, and lapel pins. SCETV will produce a documentary on the problem of illiteracy in South Carolina, tying it in with the PLUS campaign. And moving beyond awareness, the station will also launch significant activities on the instructional front. It will be broadcasting Kentucky's highly-acclaimed high-school equivalency series throughout the state and, to help train tutors, will use its closed-circuit teleconference system to link schools, colleges, and technical assistance centers.

Moreover, in a separate effort, SCETV will sponsor a national conference in September concerned with illiteracy among prison populations. The subject to be probed is the role of public television and the creative uses of other technologies–videocassettes, computers, interactive video–for teaching literacy skills to prison inmates who read at less than a sixth-grade level.

A preliminary study conducted by SCETV at the Wateree State Prison in Rembert (SC)



Reprinted with permission from EDUCATION WEEK, Vol. V, No. 14, December 4, 1985

provides data typical for many prisons across the U.S. This data will provide a national perspective for the consideration of the conferees–including representatives of the U.S. Department of Justice, literacy experts, educational broadcasters, prison administrators, teachers, and inmates.

AMERICAN TICKET, a project of KCET in Los Angeles, is about to field test a half-hour pilot for a national series on literacy. Intended for audiences 15 years and older, the series will be geared to the needs of school dropouts, native English speakers who are functionally illiterate, and foreign-born persons with limited English competence.

Using a magazine format and story lines, the episodes (26 are planned) will combine entertainment, comedy, and information. They will focus on language and life-coping skills and explore aspects of American culture. While they will put a premium on the teaching of useful skills from the very beginning–each episode will contain segments that teach specific skills such as writing a check or recognition of a job-related word–the primary thrust is motivational. The goal is to reach the at-home adult who has not enrolled in any program and to move him or her to seek help. Because KCET's research showed that the overwhelming desire of the target audience is to get a job or a better job, the setting of the series will represent the world of work. The 25-minute pilot, tentatively titled "The American Sign Factory," is set in the shipping room of a factory where signs are made. Plans call for the widest possible distribution of the series–including open broadcast on PBS and cable; video and audio cassettes for use in the school, home, and workplace; teachers guides; print instructional materials; and other outreach activities.

Project Second Chance of the Arkansas Educational Television Network also plans to go national with a state-tested program that

gives high school dropouts a second chance to earn a high school diploma. The national plan builds on the network's successful 1984-85 experience–using Kentucky's GED series –in which thousands of adults in Arkansas were drawn back into education. A one-hour documentary will be produced dealing specifically with high school dropouts. It will contain material for parents on what they can do to keep their children in school. It will speak to educators on how to make the educational experience of students more meaningful and interesting, presenting personal profiles of dropouts who later completed GED progams. A 30-minute follow-up for broadcast on local PBS stations will be added, and then an enrollment campaign on television will register students for the instructional program.

It is worth noting that the Kentucky GED television lessons have been used by many states other than Arkansas and South Carolina, and it has been used in several contexts: direct study at home via television with viewers given access to a toll-free telephone hotline for personal help, and presentation via videocassettes in adult learning centers either through teacher-directed classes or in monitored self-study. Nationally-averaged statistics show that about 65 percent of adults studying at home on their own with hotline help pass the GED exam, as do 85 percent of those studying in a learning center.

The Challenge To Non-Broadcasters

The Coalition's Ad Council campaign has another two years or so to run and can be expected to have an increasing response. Projects like the three state efforts cited above will build the momentum. Add to that the powerful impact that the extraordinary PLUS initiative is likely to have and it is not hard to conclude that the battle for public awareness can be won.

People throughout the field are both relieved and excited about this prospect, for lack of awareness has long been a major impediment to developing the environment needed to provide basic skills instruction on a level at all commensurate with the need. Yet in the current flush of excitement lurk certain dangers.

The fact is that broadcast awareness activities, even when combined with local community action, cannot alone turn the illiteracy problem around–nor do any of the projects and campaigns discussed above claim this. As ABC's Duffy points out, their role is to help set the framework for participation and action.

What the nation must realize is that success on the awareness front in the short-run, could ultimately result in failure–unless public and private sector funding sources can respond quickly with substantial new monies to support and nurture the new activities that will be generated.

Among the priority problems are these:

- Even before the Ad Council campaign was launched, most literacy programs were already stretched to capacity in their service, and most had long waiting lists of tutors and students they lacked the resources to handle. Although some states and cities have since allocated new money to adult literacy activities, the overall national situation has not changed appreciably. Most programs are still strapped. Not only that, but they will be further strapped as they are called upon for technical assistance by the many new groups that will choose to enter the field as a result of PLUS and the other awareness activities.

To be sure, better organization and coordination of services at the local level can be expected to produce benefits in overall service. And new groups and partnerships will further extend the range and availability of services (though new programs cannot be implemented overnight). In these ways, it has been estimated that the present national system for delivering basic skills instruction can be doubled or perhaps tripled in capacity, but only with a generous infusion of federal, state, and private-sector funding. In short, as things are now, existing programs are in real danger of being overwhelmed by a demand that they are not equipped to meet.

- The CONTACT Literacy Center is of central importance to the success of the PLUS and Ad Council campaigns. The costs of operating this national telephone referral system when PLUS is launched will increase about six-fold. Yet CONTACT has so far met with only minimal success in raising the funds needed to support the Ad Council campaign. Gary Hill estimates that somewhere in the neighborhood of $1.9 million will have to be forthcoming if CONTACT is to effectively field the tremendous volume of calls (more than 600,000) it will get during the year beginning in September.

- The Arkansas, South Carolina, and Los Angeles projects are also important elements of the national awareness effort. Moreover, they are all the more important because of the potential they hold as national models of direct instruction. Yet all are in need of major funding. *Project Second Chance* is budgeted at $1.8 million. Some aid has been forthcoming from the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, the Mott Foundation, the Piton Foundation, and Wal-Mart Stores, but considerably more is needed. Research, development, and production of the AMERICAN TICKET pilot was funded by a $500,000 grant from the Harry and Grace Steele Foundation, with modest supplementary funding from the California Department of Education. Several million dollars more are needed to develop that series for national use. And when the SCETV research activity turns to production of actual materials, substantial funding will be needed for that.

It is stating the obvious to note that television production is extremely costly. Yet the kind of activity represented by these three projects holds great promise in efforts to combat the national adult illiteracy problem. Because of its extensive outreach, its low unit cost when reaching national audiences, and the pedagogic versatility it has already demonstrated at higher education levels, the potential of television as a direct provider of basic skills instruction could be enormous under the right circumstances.

It is to be hoped that the challenge of the above broadcast activities, especially those of PLUS, can be met. The business community is certainly a much-needed partner in the non-broadcast response. So is the general philanthropic community. But no one has a more vital role than state and federal legislative officials, governors, and mayors. In this regard, the recently-announced literacy project of the Education Commission of the States (see News in Brief) could be of tremendous assistance.

Finally, it should be noted that this article has focussed on the ingredients for success in the short-run. It should be kept in mind that, in the long run, major problems bearing on the effectiveness of instruction will also need to be addressed. There is, for example, still a paucity of research on how to develop instructional materials for adults most in need of basic skills help. And suitable tools will have to be developed for diagnosing and assessing learning–something needed by all operating programs. Moreover, the thousands of people who will volunteer their help in response to PLUS and the other activities will need to be supported by more professionally-trained teachers and managers. Each of these is a major challenge in itself; each will take years of work and a national resolve to stay with it. ■